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ABSTRACT

Perspectives concerning search committees for college faculty and administrators are considered. Most of the existing literature on college and university search committees deals with general presidential and, to a lesser extent, with administrative searches. Search committees are a fairly recent phenomenon in higher education, and their growth is the result of state and federal legislation affecting faculty and staff members, a more participatory approach to college administration, and an enlarged pool of qualified candidates. Although the search process is subtle and varied, major activities of search committees include: organizing the group, advertising and seeking nominations, screening the applications, checking references, arranging interviews, and making a recommendation to the group or person making the final decision. A careful selection of search committee members and a clear mandate for the committee are important. Another major prerequisite is that search committee members be familiar with the problems, needs, and values of the school or department. Finally, a realistic position description and a thoughtful list of candidate qualifications are needed by the committee. Information on a time table for a presidential search and the cost of a search are included. (SW)

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The Role and Effectiveness of Search Committees

by Jane Doyle Bromert

A March 9, 1983 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ran the following headline, "Auburn President Quits After Year of Faculty Unrest" (p. 3). The article described the rise and fall of Auburn's president, H. Hanly Funderburk. Among other things, it said that although a committee of trustees had "eventually bowed to pressure from faculty and appointed several faculty members as advisors, recommendation was disregarded during the much-publicized compromise that resulted in Mr. Funderburk's appointment." The piece stated that some observers at Auburn believed that the search committee's exclusionary attitudes and methods had politicized what had previously been characterized as an apathetic faculty. In Mr. Funderburk's letter of resignation, he reminded the trustees that he had accomplished the assignments the board had presented when he took the job.

This incident is a rare, publicized example of an ineffective search process that ultimately led to institutional upheaval. Although it involved a presidential position, the same approach to the search process can wreak havoc and internal dissension among personnel at other position levels as well.

The use of search committees had burgeoned so rapidly on most campuses that few schools have taken time to develop a rational, systematic method for organizing the efforts of such groups. Properly conducted, a search can be an important tool for increasing the effectiveness of an academic unit or institution. Kaplowitz (1973) states that effective procedures for recruiting, screening, and nominating candidates for positions in higher education are essential to institutional vitality. If hiring is carried out in a haphazard, chaotic manner, the results can be disastrous for all concerned.

About the Literature

Research on college and university search committees is in its incipient stages. Some fine works have been published, particularly those by Kaplowitz (1973), Kauffman (1974), and Nason (1980). The bulk of the existing literature deals primarily with general presidential and, to a lesser extent, with administrative searches; it consists primarily of monographs analyzing specific aspects of the search process. Many of the publications carry few or no bibliographic citations; frequently the references are peripheral in nature.

Statistical studies exploring various aspects of the search process make up a miniscule portion of the research. Frederick deW. Bolman (1965) did a thorough work on how presidents were chosen between 1959-62. Two later studies, one by Lutz (1979) and another by Reid and Rogers (1981), make solid contributions.

A New Phenomenon

Search committees are a fairly recent phenomenon in higher education. Their growth is the result of state and federal legislation affecting faculty and staff members (Fortunato and Waddell 1981), a more participatory approach to college administration, and an enlarged pool of qualified candidates.

Years ago, boards of trustees used search committees in an advisory capacity to help select chief administrative officers. Representative constituencies, including faculty, staff, students, alumni, and the community-at-large, were gathered to assist in finding the "perfect" president or chancellor (Bennis 1971; Kern 1971). The method was infrequently used for the selection of faculty or other professional staff. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many people selected for positions in higher education prior to the

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early 1970's were chosen through informal systems, often through the "old boy" network. A factor that reinforced that network was the traditional way of climbing the academic career ladder—from professor to department chair to dean to vice-president to president (Socolow 1978).

Many will argue that old-boy systems still thrive in academe. However, that approach has become inadequate because of affirmative-action legislation, the greater numbers of people (particularly women and minorities) competing for jobs in higher education, and the increasingly complex task of running institutions of higher learning. People have seen the need for other approaches to assess and gain the services of faculty, professional staff, and administrative officers.

Academic and administrative openings in higher education were not advertised nationally until March 30, 1970, when *The Chronicle* began its "Positions Available" feature. It would be difficult to trace the nebulous process people used to obtain jobs before this time. Most older academicians, when they discuss how they got their first job, relate stories about "someone who knew someone else" or about flyers sent to departments or placement offices throughout the country. It is difficult to determine just when professional journals began following the example of *The Chronicle,* but today most such publications regularly publish information about positions available in particular disciplines or professional fields.

If positions have become more widely and systematically advertised, when were search committees first used to help fill openings? Alexander Cartwright (1976), using *The Chronicle* as a gauge, indicated that of nineteen positions listed in the August 31, 1970, issue, only two named a search committee as the designated contact for applicants or for further information. Today, a glimpse at this same publication indicates that search committees are now used much more frequently as the point of contact.

The Committee's Functions

Even as search committees have become a fixture in higher education, they do present their own set of problems. There are legitimate differences of opinion about the validity of search committees and how best to use them (Reinart, 1974). It is almost certainly true that such committees are often used to circumvent affirmative-action mandates or to validate decisions that have already been made (Reid and Rogers May 1981). Moreover, many in academe, whether they were members of a committee or simply seeking employment, can relate horror tales about present-day searches. Beyond that, faculty union contracts, the internal politics of an institution, and the personalities of individual committee members vary with each setting.

While all these variables inhibit development of a formula applicable to all situations, a basic format can be established. Without denigrating the advantages of experimenting with alternatives to the search committee, it may be more productive to try to perfect the present search process as a positive tool to enhance institutional effectiveness.

On the surface, a search committee's functions seem uncomplicated. Normally the committee is charged with the responsibility of recruiting candidates, screening applicants, checking references, participating in preliminary interviews, then recommending a fixed number of persons to a designated administrator who makes the final selection (Fortunato and Waddell, 1981, p. 107). The process, however, is more subtle and varied than it first appears, and the research indicates that one is unlikely to find established patterns for the process even within individual institutions.

In recent years, rising tenure ratios and retrenchment steps have combined to reduce the yearly number of faculty and administrative openings. Nonetheless, openings are still available, particularly at the administrative level. A recent study of 3,250 colleges and universities by Higher Education Publications, Inc., concluded that for administrators in 55 job categories there was a combined two-year turnover rate of 39.3 percent (Jacobsen 1983, p. 25). Although a complete explanation for this seemingly high rate is beyond the scope of this paper, it seems reasonable to assume that at least part of the turnover is attributable to personal or institutional dissatisfaction. In many instances, this dissatisfaction can be traced to persons discovering that the reality of their position differed significantly from the original job description, or to the university or college finding that the person they hired did not "fit" the particular position or institutional philosophy.

"Fit," as defined by Lutz (1979), implies that after a person has been working in a position for a period of time, he or she will have performed in such a way that the selection committee would make the same choice again. "Fit" also means that the person who accepted the appointment would accept it again, were the offer repeated. If *both* parties are satisfied, the person selected "fits" the institution and vice-versa. Lutz's study of 32 colleges that had selected academic deans, surveyed the individuals who had accepted positions and members of their respective search committees. The results indicated that only half of all respondents would have made the same decisions. As Lutz states, "A search for a dean should produce a better fit than would the simple toss of the coin."

Time and Money

Though Lutz's study has not been applied to all of academe, the evidence itself justifies the design of more effective search processes in higher education. Two practical considerations for wringing optimum results from a search committee are time and money, commodities that are precious in any situation. Nason's (1980) study of presidential searches clearly delineates what is at stake on both counts. His research, which involved two- and four-year public and private colleges and universities, showed that the time investment ranged from one day to twenty-four months.

Nason's work concerns the selection of presidents, but the basic time-consuming elements of those searches are applicable to any search committee: organizing the group, advertising and seeking nominations, screening the applications, checking refer-

ences, arranging interviews, and, finally, making a recommendation to the group or person making the final decision.

Time Table for a Presidential Search

	Range In Months	Median In Months
4-year public	2-12	7.5
2-year public	1-6	4.5
private university	1-18	9
4-year private	4-18	7
4-year church related	1 day-15 months	5.7
2-year private	3-24	5

The amount of money spent on the search committee process should also prompt people to make the process more effective. The following table is again from Nason and reflects dollar costs in the late 1970s.

Cost of a Presidential Search

	Range of Cost	Median
4-year public	$1,000-$25,000	$ 8,500
2-year public	0 - 50,000	4,000
private university	2,000 - 55,000	18,600
4-year private college	0 - 50,000	7,500
4-year church-related	0 - 25,000	3,000
2-year private	0 - 5,000	3,000

It is relatively easy to determine the level of some of these expenditures, such as advertising, postage, telephone, travel, meals, and consulting contracts. The indirect costs, including the time of clerical assistants and committee members, though sometimes hard to determine, should not be ignored. In his survey, Nason found that the median cost of a presidential search was about $6,000, with the costliest at $55,000. Regardless of these variations, all search committees must be given adequate money and time to carry out their obligations and sufficient forethought and direction so that the investment bears good fruit.

Before the Search Starts

Many researchers, including Fouts (1977), Kauffman (1974), Nason (1980), Lutz (1979), and Kaplowitz (1973), set forth guidelines on how colleges and universities can best secure people to fill open positions. Effective results may depend heavily on what Kelly (1977) terms "pre search" activities. A first prerequisite in every search process is a genuine understanding of the institution by the persons chosen to serve on search committees. Members familiar with the problems, opportunities, needs, and values of their school or department can, for example, create a plausible job description, focused on reality rather than on some quixotic, philosophical ideal (Lutz, 1979, p. 269). Many writers have concentrated on the problem of the proper composition of search committees; most believe that membership should be representative of the major groups with the college community served by the position and also representative of the college or university at-large.

The precise charge to the committee should be clearly defined at the outset and adhered to steadfastly. Kelly (1977) argues that the committee's specific functions should be fully explained the first time the group meets. If the committee's mandate (Nason 1980) and the extent of its authority are left ambiguous or confusing, the selection process can break down at critical points along the way. Moreover, the mandate should be made public, to let the academic community know what it can expect in the future.

Once the committee is formed, it is necessary to define the qualifications candidates will need to satisfy for consideration. This is an action that requires judicious assessment. Committees often list qualities and attributes simply because they are the opposite of the incumbant's perceived faults. A better method would be to select qualities based on a careful assessment of the long-term needs of the institution and the setting in which the institution exists (Stauffer 1976, p. 170). Search committees sometimes lose perspective and seek to find the single, superior being who exists only on paper or in the perfect world of the mind's eye. Karol and Ginsburg (1980) suggest development of clearly articulated qualification criteria weighted according to their importance. Are, for example, certain traits essential or are they merely desirable?

The "search" is now ready to begin. In essence, the process—with the possible exception of the interview—is a somewhat mechanical, standard procedure. It can never be put into motion smoothly, however, unless a firm foundation for an effective search process has been laid in advance. To summarize, the parts of that foundation consist of the following, in sequence: a full understanding of and commitment to the institutional mission; a careful selection of the search committee; a clear mandate; a realistic position description; and a thoughtful list of candidate qualifications.

There is a desperate need for a broad study of the search process as it applies to the entire university community. Only if scholars are willing to produce comprehensive and specific studies can we hope to improve procedures and insure more effective results. Case studies outlining what occurred during successful searches, for example, would be very beneficial. Empirical research reports, based on statistical surveys, also could enhance our understanding of this complex issue. Anecdotal evidence, be it from an institution's or the candidate's point-of-view, can be a valuable source of knowledge about the search process.

The selection of academic staff and faculty will undoubtedly remain more of an art than a science, regardless of the search strategies employed. The best strategies will not guarantee success nor will the worst necessarily result in failure (Fouts 1977, p. 10). The ultimate goal, however, is to establish search processes that increase the effectiveness of our colleges and universities.

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